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SIPDIS

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CAIRO FOR MAXSTADT, TASHKENT FOR BURKHALTER

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: AN IJAW'S VIEW OF THE IJAW-ITSEKIRI
CONFLICT

Ref: Lagos 736

1. Summary: On April 6, EconOff heard the Ijaws' side of the story regarding their longstanding conflict with the Itsekiris, the subject of reftel. The Ijaws argue that they have a legitimate claim to the land in and about Warri. Our Ijaw interlocutor, who acted as if he spoke for the Ijaws collectively, disclosed impatience with negotiations to resolve the conflict. He said the Ijaws have concluded an agreement with ChevronTexaco that will enable a modus vivendi. The same cannot be said for the relations between the Ijaws and Nigerian military forces in the region. Should they interfere with the April 12 and 19 elections, the Ijaws will be prepared to oppose force against force. End summary.

2. Doyah Tiemo, an Ijaw leader and former banker and financial consultant, spoke with EconOff on April 6 about the Ijaw-Itsekiri conflict. Tiemo asserted that the conflict is about land ownership, as did an Itsekiri contact (reftel). He blamed the Itsekiris, whom he said claim exclusive ownership to Warri and its environs and look upon Ijaws as settlers or migrant tenants, terms he considers derogatory. According to Tiemo, the Itsekiris found the Ijaws already in place when the former arrived in the Warri area. Tiemo said the Ijaw's have been in the region since 1450 so they cannot be characterized as "settlers". The use of the terms tenant or settler thus impedes peace, he said. Tiemo asserted that the Ijaws helped the Itsekiris establish themselves in the area when it became necessary for the first son of the Oba of Ilua to leave Benin. The Ijaws then provided land to him and his 70 chiefs and all settled in the Warri area.

3. Tiemo doubted that a meeting between members of the Ijaws, Itsekiris, and Urhobos on the one hand, and President Obasanjo on the other hand, would take place on April 7 because the Ijaws had reservations about the list of invitees. The Delta State government compiled the list of the delegates for the meeting with the President, Tiemo said. Some of the Ijaw youth groups oppose the Ijaw elders who figure prominently on the list, people whom they feel have sold them out. The youth are also unhappy that the proposed delegates have yet to deliver results from negotiations on their behalf. Furthermore, the delegates do not appear to have a clear mandate from the Ijaw community with respect to what it should expect from the meeting.

4. Tiemo said relations between the Itsekiris and Ijaws might improve if more local government areas (LGA) were established and if they would in turn allow for the economic development of areas by the respective ethnic groups. This would mean that the different groups could have their own assemblies at the state level. Tiemo's plan calls for the creation of three additional LGAs to bring the total to six. The Istekiris and Ijaws would then control three LGAs each, and a seventh LGA would serve as a central unit and be composed of Ijaws, Urhobos, and Itsekiris.

5. Tiemo disclosed deep-seated Ijaw grudges against the oil companies operating in the region. He stated that the companies "undermine" the Ijaws even though most of the oil wells are on their land. One complaint Tiemo mentioned against the oil companies is the alleged insufficient number of Ijaws on their work force. To rectify this situation, ChevronTexaco recently agreed to employ as permanent staff an Ijaw from each of the ten communities per year for the next five years, he said.

6. Contrary to the Itsekiri viewpoint (reftel), Tiemo does not welcome Nigeria's military presence in the area. He

opined that should the military forces intervene in the conduct of the elections, they will encounter resistance from the Ijaw boys, a group of young men 15-20 years old. He said the Ijaws are numerous, know the terrain, and are better equipped than the military forces in the area. The Ijaws have GSM phones, satellite phones, mobile radio equipment, and automatic weapons. (Comment: Indeed, both the oil companies and the Nigerian military have admitted that the Ijaws are far better armed than they realized. End commen).

17. Tiemo concluded the discussion by reaffirming the Ijaw's claim to the land disputed by the Itsekiris. He added that all the ethnic groups in the area have to live together peacefully since Warri and its environs are the mainstay of the country's economy. But making his point that arms and other combat equipment are in the hands of Ijaw youth, he boasted that most members of the Ijaw community contribute money to support them and, with money, the boys have no difficulty obtaining what they want.

HINSON-JONES